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ABSTRACT

An overview of the development of educational policy in Kiribati, a Pacific island nation, is presented in this paper. The decade of the 1970s was a period of tension between educators, economists, planners, parents, and politicians. These sectors interacted in shaping educational policy regarding government's financial responsibility for primary education, the number of required years of school attendance, curriculum and other issues. This debate reflected a growing public demand for universal education (at least through 6 years of primary school) and for a curriculum that prepared students for island life. In contrast, the government felt that there was no need, in economic and manpower terms, to provide better schools, and that universal primary education could only be achieved at great cost to the community. Over time, policies began to change gradually. The government's financial investment in schools increased, although many primary schools continued to charge fees. By mid-decade, consensus was reached on a policy that recognized the increased demand for secondary education and the need for a curriculum relevant to those students not continuing their schooling. The Community High Schools project was a pilot program undertaken in 1977 to experiment with a way of meeting the demand for "life preparation" courses for students not intending to pursue academics. The history of this scheme demonstrates the attempts made to reconcile in public education policy the tensions and pressures that existed among various sectors. Resolution of the tensions inherent in educational change were achieved, not through reports, reviews, and commissions, but through adaptation and consensus. The paper concludes by examining directions in educational policies in the 1980s. (KH)

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KIRIBATI:

THE SEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL DIRECTION

IN A PACIFIC CONTEXT

by

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KIRIBATI - THE SEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL DIRECTION IN A PACIFIC CONTEXT

COLIN HINDSON

INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 1970's was a period when developing countries in the Pacific began to give deeper consideration to their educational aims. Political, economic and social changes brought with them criticism of the slow rate of educational change, and of the type of education that existed. There was a growing awareness that the majority of students who could not proceed to secondary school might benefit from a curriculum designed for living in their own island communities. Often this awareness was expressed only in vague terms, and practice continued to be to pursue more schooling of the type that already existed.

The 1970's thus was a period of tension in formulation of educational policy - between and among educators, economists, planners, parents and politicians. These tensions are apparent in the conflicting views that appeared in planning documents, economic and educational, in education reports and enquiries, in reports of seminars on education and in Parliament where both views of the public and of political convenience were elaborated. This article will examine the existence and reconciliation of these conflicting, and often shifting views in the formulation of changes in education policy in Kiribati from 1969 to the early 1980's. Consideration is restricted to primary and secondary level schooling as being the major areas of concern in a specific context.

Kiribati is an independent Republic (1979) with approximately 56,000 people (1978 census), consisting of the Gilbert, Phoenix and Line Islands plus Banaba. In 1969, these islands were part of the Gilbert and Ellice Island Colony (hereafter G.E.I.C.), from which the Ellice Islands separated to become Tuvalu in 1975. No distinction is made between the groups before 1975 in this article, as policy was consistent for all, and the Ellice group was the minority, though where possible references are made to the schools in the Gilberts only. The system is not large - in Kiribati in 1981 there

were 102 government and four private primary schools in the Gilbert and Line Islands and Banaba, with 13,836 students and 450 teachers. There was one government high school, 4 non-government, and 2 unaided "community high schools". At this level there were 661 students and 94 teachers in 1981, plus 711 at the two "Community High Schools" in South Tarawa.

EDUCATIONAL DIRECTION IN THE EARLY 1970's

Educational direction for the early 1970's was set by the 1969 Tregear Report on Educational Development in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. At that stage the system consisted of a 6 year primary school commencing at age 6, a government high school with Forms 1-5, and 3 unaided church "junior secondary" schools (Form 1-3, 2 Catholic, 1 Protestant). The control of education was diffuse. Primary schools were run by government, Island Council, Mission or village; some had trained teachers, some had government aid. During the late 1960's there had been attempts to consolidate smaller schools into larger units, with some government assistance, and a proposal to set up a pilot project of 2 year general secondary schools. However these programmes proved beyond the colony's resources.¹ Nevertheless there was evidence that people seemed dissatisfied with the programme of only 6 years of education for the majority of children.

This was reflected in a debate on education in the House of Representatives (May 1969) prior to Tregear's visit. The Resident Commissioner stressed economic restraint, and that the colony could not afford better primary education. On manpower grounds, output from the secondary school was sufficient. The Commissioner of Works made the administration's views quite clear when he stated that education should not be regarded as an end in itself, but as a means of improving the economic future. It was suggested that the aim of universal education would have to be abandoned. Local members, however, were most unhappy with these sentiments. They spoke quite strongly against

the attempt to restrain any educational expansion, and the paper under discussion was not allowed to proceed to the Committee stage.²

In his report of October, 1969, P.S. Tregear took a different line to that of the colony's administration. He acknowledged the social role of education, and also the political difficulty in not providing primary education to all children. While conceding secondary schooling's manpower role, he favoured for primary schooling a curriculum more suited to the majority "for whom life on an atoll remains their future". He recommended a 9 year primary school, from 6 to 15 years of age, and that government aid should be expanded. He also recommended expansion of the government secondary school, and provision of government aid to the mission and church junior secondary schools.³

The 1970-1972 Development Plan (February 1970) seemed not to favour educational growth. Manpower restrictions were still paramount, and the economic planners considered the demand for a primary education complete in itself and equal opportunity for all as impractical. "The need is to provide sufficient numbers with an adequate education to enable them to proceed to further secondary education to meet the shortage of skilled labour".⁴ The plan saw the longer term socio-political goal of universal primary education as being reached only with great cost to the community. Speaking in the House of Representatives early in 1970, the Director of Education also took this line - that there was no need, in economic terms, to provide better-grade primary schools.⁵

Local members disagreed with this when a draft Education Policy paper, based on the Tregear Report, was passed by the House in May 1970. The aim of 9 year primary schooling was accepted, with more attention given to the relevance of the curriculum for island life. All primary schools would be eligible for government aid, as would staff. A uniform system of primary schools was to be developed. The government high school, the King George Vth/Elaine Bernacchi School (K.G.V./E.B.S.) was to be expanded but there appeared no need to expand output from the non-government junior secondary schools, though some aid was given to develop projects of a vocational nature. Debate in the House was of

a much more conciliatory nature than the previous year, and the economic difficulties were conceded. It was accepted that fees would need to be charged at primary schools. Thus direction was set for education in the 1970's.

That some felt not enough attention had been given to curriculum change was evident from a symposium on teacher education held at Tarawa Teachers College in April 1971.⁶ Local participants spoke of the need for more emphasis on locally relevant skills in the primary curriculum particularly at upper primary level, and a raising of the school leaving age. Of particular concern was the young school-leaver, whose education had not prepared him/her for living in their own local community.

Despite the apparent shift of education policy to a more "quality of life" emphasis, the 1971-1973 Development Plan still took a very severe manpower view of education policy. The highest immediate priority was given to increasing and improving the output of secondary school leavers, the second priority to primary education. Even here, manpower aims had to be reconciled with those relating to social change - "to develop suitable courses, curricula and teaching methods in primary schools to meet the needs of the secondary intake, prospective employment, and life in the island communities".⁷ Attitude to the role of the non-government junior secondary schools was changing. The Development Plan recognised that "this level of output has development benefits", and allocated capital aid to these schools. The Director of Education, speaking in the Legislative Council in July, 1971 also acknowledged that "the pressure from parents has created a demand ... which is beginning to be met more copiously by junior secondary schools run by the churches".⁸

The next 3 years, to 1974 saw little change in schooling, Consolidation of smaller primary schools continued, and building grants were given to Island Councils and Catholic Mission schools. In 1973,

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government took over payment of all qualified teachers, and further aid for supplies was given to non-government schools. K.G.V./E.B.S. was now a 6 year school, with an upper 5th form. A Seventh Day Adventist junior secondary school is mentioned for the first time in the Education Report for 1973.

Uneasiness concerning direction in education was still reflected in planning documents and parliamentary comments during this period. The 1973-76 Development Plan, still placing educational priority on skilled manpower, for the first time recognised that other aims conflicted with this - "no solution has yet been found to the conflicting requirements of foreign-oriented secondary or vocational education for a few, against the rural and comparatively non-technical needs of most school-children". Unfortunately, the plan could offer no help to find this solution except that "... research into this problem locally must be pressed forward by the educators in full consultation with others".⁹ In Parliament, speakers raised questions about the speed of social change, and education's role in this. The Director of Education in 1972 spoke of the fears of "growing materialism" and of the need for schools that reflected "the views and aspirations of the community".¹⁰ In early 1974, the Shadow Minister for Education queried the direction education was taking, and criticised the government's policy which he saw as too academic and not geared enough to local needs.¹¹ In reply, the Minister pointed out that "people want more secondary schools like K.G.V.", but that the government did not intend to establish them - rather it would give aid to the church secondary schools. Here is an acknowledgement of the pressures that parents were exerting on the system, and of the role of the non-government junior secondary schools in meeting a need that the government could not. Thus, while some speakers called for attention to "quality" aspects, the government was more concerned with "quantity".

The demand for further education beyond primary school is evident when it is realised that of the 1,523 pupils in Class 6 in 1974, only 90 were admitted for Form 1 of the secondary high schools in 1975.¹²

In 1975, only 17.5% of the age group in school or 13.6% of the total age group were selected for secondary education in all secondary high schools. Of this number about a quarter were provided with education beyond Form 3. This meant about 4% of the school-age group or 2% of the total age group went onto school certificate level.¹³

REVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL DIRECTION 1975

In 1975, the year of Ellice Island separation as Tuvalu, a review of education policy was carried out for the Gilberts. During late 1974, working-parties of local educators prepared a draft paper which was discussed by the Education Advisory Committee. A summary paper was then released for public discussion early in 1975, and a final paper drawn up in July. This was discussed and approved in the House of Assembly in November of 1975. The main recommendations reflected both the demand for more schools and the desire for a more "appropriate" education.¹⁴ Primary education would revert to 6 years in a national system in which all government, Island Council and Mission schools were to be run by the Ministry, compulsory fee-free education at this level being the ultimate aim. "Community High Schools" of three years were to be set up, with a more localised curriculum catering for the needs of the many island children who could not proceed to high school. The isolated upper primary classes were to be brought together to provide these island community high schools, in which the existing syllabus was to be amended and expanded to enable pupils to more readily adapt to their home environment. It was anticipated that a wide curriculum should embrace English, mathematics, community development, mechanical skills, native arts and civics. In this way it was hoped that the pupils would be more fitted for life in their own communities. These schools, it was hoped, would be to some extent self-supporting, the buildings would be in local materials, a fee would be charged, and the school would be able to render services to the community that might be a source of income.¹⁵

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The question of integrating the Church secondary schools with the government system was deferred by the Education Advisory Committee, which had a majority of members with church interests.¹⁶ However, church schools were to become more integrated with the government system, becoming subject to Ministry inspection and advice, and would receive subsidies for equipment and supplies. A proposal in the summary forwarded to the Minister to investigate involvement in a 6th form College in Honiara proved politically unacceptable - the final policy recommended a 6th form at K.G.V./E.B.S., a much more popular move locally. It was stressed that the development of the new system would take some time to complete.

Thus midway through the decade, a policy prepared mainly by local people appeared to have gained consensus, and there appeared to be a recognition of both the increased demand for secondary education and the need for a curriculum relevant to those not continuing to further academic schooling. A unified system was emerging, and manpower needs were to be met through a more integrated secondary system. At this point, tensions seemed to have eased, and expectations were high.

1976 was a year of planning and preparation. A new Education Ordinance was passed, to allow absorption of Mission and Church schools and teachers into the Government system. The decision was taken to start a pilot project of 4 Community High Schools (C.H.S.) at the beginning of 1977. A Curriculum Committee had been set up to consider syllabi and teaching-training for these schools. There was some evidence even at this stage, however, that the public were unclear as to the aims of these schools. Questions in the House of Assembly tended to focus on "more" high schools rather than "what kind".

Many of the new policies were put into practice in 1977. The government assumed responsibility for all primary education when the Protestant and Catholic Mission schools and staff were completely integrated into the system, 6 schools choosing to remain independent. School fees were abolished for all classes 1-6 except for those in South Tarawa, Banaba and the Line Islands. The review of the 1973-76 Development Plan (March 1977) appeared to show a shift in development

thinking (or rhetoric) away from the manpower implications of education. Concerns expressed were more with educational matters, e.g. lack of qualified teachers at primary level, and curriculum development. Apparently the aim of universal primary education, now defined as Class 1-6, had been virtually accomplished - approximately 97% of children of primary school age (6-11) attended school regularly.

The demand for high school places was reflected in the fact that in 1977 approximately 2,800 pupils aged 11-12 sat for the Common Entrance Examination, for 210 places in Form 1 for 1978.¹⁷ High school selection was based upon candidate's performances in:

- a general ability test designed to measure potential (replaced in 1981 by a Vernacular Aptitude Test),
- a mathematics attainment test, and
- an English attainment test.

A quota system ensured that all islands presenting candidates were represented at secondary school level.

The demand for post-secondary schooling and the inadequate provision, was commented on by Love when he pointed out that the 1978 census showed that secondary school enrolment was 13% of the age group, compared to Fiji's 58%.¹⁸ This, he stated, was a comparatively low level of participation in secondary and higher education in Pacific and in general Third World terms.

"To some extent this is a characteristic colonial legacy, borne out by the substantial numbers of non-Pacific persons employed in key professional and administrative jobs in the country".¹⁹

THE COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

By the end of 1977, progress of the C.H.S project had been slower than expected. Aid had not come till late in the year, from Australia rather than Britain, and equipment and materials had not been fully distributed and set up. While the Education Report for that year stressed the experimental nature, and the practical emphasis of the C.H.S. project, leading students to local employment and to further

professional training (e.g. the Marine Training School and Tarawa Technical Institute), questions raised in the House still reflected some confusion in attitude. Many members still obviously saw them as "high schools" and wanted to see them extended to all islands as soon as possible.

The direction of the Community High Schools also dominated the educational scene in 1978. Output of teachers from the Teachers College increased to meet demand at primary level, and it was announced that compulsory primary education would be phased in from 1980. Two non-government, non-aided "Community High Schools" (one Latter Day Saints, one Catholic) had opened on South Tarawa, reflecting both population pressures, and parents' desires for further education.

A major statement by the Ministry of Education, Training and Culture (M.E.T.C.) on the C.H.S. project was released during 1978. This pointed out the non-academic nature of the syllabus, and the aims of the institutions. It explained the difficulties encountered in getting the project going, and the need to wait for an appraisal of the project in 1979 or 1980 before any final judgement. The statement, however, also recognised the difficulty in convincing parents that these were not just more high schools - "It is realized that to make people understand and accept this new idea means changing their attitude which we are aware cannot be changed overnight".²⁰

That this view was generally held was emphasized by a motion moved in the House in September 1978 to "expedite the construction of such schools (C.H.S.) on all islands throughout the Gilberts".²¹ The mover spoke of the numerous questions and motions raised in the House to establish more secondary schools "similar to K.G.V./E.B.S.," and the establishment of the Community High Schools to overcome these problems. Although the Minister for Education spoke against the motion, stressing the nature of the C.H.S., and the short time they had been given to establish themselves, the motion was lost by one vote. Thus a change in educational direction was avoided by the narrowest of margins, reflecting the tensions and misunderstandings that existed.

In the light of this, it is interesting to note that the Governor's address earlier in 1978 had stressed that "the whole education system will be looked at carefully to ensure that, in so far as possible, it enables our young people to make a relevant contribution to the community".²² In contrast to the start of the decade, the administration was exhorting "relevant education", and the local members wanted more academic schooling - an apparent turn-around. In truth, the demand for academic schooling had probably been present, but had not been fully articulated.

It is worth reiterating at this point Love's comment (p. 8 above) that throughout this period most of the senior administrators were British expatriates, who wielded a great deal of influence in the educational planning process. Indeed, the important 1980 speech by the Minister for Education on the Community High School issue referred to below (p. 11) was written by the Secretary for Education, then a British expatriate. It was not until 1981 that the post of Secretary for Education became localized.

The 1970-82 National Development Plan (N.D.P.) confirmed the general shift in official rhetoric. Its main educational aim was "to develop an education system that provides for the needs and conditions of the community in both quality and quantity".²³ For the first time there was a recognition of organisational difficulties in setting up the Community High Schools. "The experience of opening the pilot schools has indicated a need for more careful planning and phasing of the process".²⁴ There was still reference to provision of sufficient places in academic secondary schools to meet manpower needs. Despite the rhetoric, the N.D.P. section on academic secondary schools, and the chapter on population and employment, were still firmly linked to this.

During 1979 the Education Advisory Committee recommended that a Commission of local persons should review the C.H.S. situation during

1980. An interim evaluation by an International Labour Organisation consultant during that year suggested that there had been improvement, and that the curriculum being developed was still the most appropriate "for those who may find outside employment and those whose livelihood is on their home island".²⁵ Less encouragingly, the Ministry publication "Community News" of October 1979 pointed out parents' disillusionment with the fact that the schools did not lead to jobs, and their desire for a more general secondary education. In fact what was emerging was a number of practical difficulties. The cost of providing adequate equipment to the schools was high, the problem of recruiting and training suitable staff was becoming apparent. Even though Tarawa Teachers College had begun training teachers for those schools, adequate preparation for an increased number would require far more facilities and planning. The relative youth of the C.H.S. school leavers and their unemployability was an added worry to parents and planners.

The Commission carried out their task and their report was issued in April of 1980.²⁶ In short the Commission recommended that the C.H.S. be retained, but in a modified form. It stressed that the national economy could not afford a junior general secondary for all, and generally retained the aims of the C.H.S. However, recognising the parents' doubts the Commission recommended more emphasis on English and Mathematics to a level consistent with Form III at high schools, and the awarding of a Junior School Certificate at the end of Level 3. The best students from this level should be given opportunity to enter Form 4. In association with this, they recommended that primary schooling be extended to Class 7. Despite their comments about junior secondary schools, these recommendations seemed to favor such a system. Most importantly, they recommended that immediate steps be taken to expand C.H.S. to other islands, aiming for national coverage. Pressure for further education again appeared to have found a compromise with desire for a more relevant education.

Whether this would have been able to work is a moot point. A Ministerial statement to the House in August rejected the extension of

the Community High School.²⁷ According to the statement, the Commission had found that people wanted an academic type of education, and had rejected the role of the C.H.S. as "preparer-for-village life". The government, according to the Minister, still favoured a more practical education, but the C.H.S. experiment may have gone too far in interpreting "relevant education". The compromise reached was that primary schools would go to class 7, then some students would proceed to high schools. The rest could continue in "Upper Primary" - Classes 8 and 9, with a second chance of entry to high school after Class 9 to a special Form 2. All class 9 leavers would receive a Leaving Certificate.

EDUCATIONAL DIRECTION FOR THE 1980's

Thus the C.H.S. experiment had finished, and educational direction appeared to have altered. The system was to revert to that of the early 1970's, with some modifications. It appeared that public pressure had swung the decision-makers against continuing the C.H.S. system. While the Commission certainly had commented on general desires of parents and the faults in the scheme, there was also a certain ambiguity in opinions expressed, and a feeling that the faults were redeemable in time. No group had wanted the termination of the C.H.S. and the Commission had suggested a continuation of the scheme, albeit modified. The political decision-makers apparently chose to select from the Commission's report that which was publicly acceptable and economically feasible. One interpretation of the Government decision is that the modified scheme, if accepted, would have resulted in a system of more academic junior secondary schools. Thus the concept of Community education as originally envisaged was not being met by the structural changes and growth of the pilot schools, and would have been even further diverted by the adoption and extension of the modified scheme. The better way of meeting this original concept would be to revert to the upper primary classes as parents would not see these as structurally different. Thus expectations would not be raised as they were with the separate "high school" structure. The "Community" aspects of schooling could thus be brought in through a curriculum

change rather than structural change.²⁸ This interpretation suggests educational as well as political and economic reasons for the Government's decision. The history of the scheme demonstrated the attempts to reconcile in public education policy the tensions and pressures that existed among various sectors of the community. A compromise was reached, though the tensions and misunderstandings no doubt continued.

Thus 1981 saw Class 7 as the entry point to high school with primary school fees being phased out. Ministry policy was to consolidate classes 8 and 9 so that there were only one or two schools with upper primary level on each island, though this was meeting with mixed success. This continued into 1982, with many students staying on into Upper Primary classes. It seemed that parents saw Upper Primary as desirable for students who did not get into secondary school. Sufficient teachers were available, the teachers shortage appeared to have been solved. The first entry of pupils from Class 9 to high school took place at the end of 1982 and it remains to be seen how successful this will be, as only very few actually will gain entry.

TABLE 1

Enrolments in Secondary High Schools, Community High Schools, and Upper Primary Classes, 1975-1982.

YEAR	CLASS 7	CLASS 8	CLASS 9	SECONDARY HIGH SCHOOLS	COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOLS GOVT.	COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOLS PRIVATE
1975	926	685	330	795	-	-
1977	1247	1030	637	832	168	-
1978	1366	963	694	859	256	271
1979	1131	1032	603	947	527	358
1980	1295	962	741	957	418	751
1981	2024	1157	1029	979	-	674
1982	1896	1439	1280	950	-	711

SOURCES: Gilbert Islands and Kiribati M.E.T.C. Yearly reports
and Digest of Education Statistics.

The table above shows the enrolments in upper primary and secondary classes in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The increasing numbers in upper primary classes and the non-government C.H.S. is obvious, reflecting the continued demand for post-primary schooling, while the secondary high school places remain relatively constant.

A curriculum development project run jointly by the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific and the South Australian College of Advanced Education, and sponsored by the Australian Development Assistance Bureau, is currently reviewing the Class 8 and 9 curriculum, aiming at a general education, with emphasis for the students' environment and island life. Consolidation of upper primary schools continues, and an aid project is placing resource materials at larger primary schools, which should operate as both resource and teacher centres on each island. Thus the trend appears to be to larger primary schools with upper primary classes using a revised curriculum, acting as local education centres. It may only be a short step before an island allocates one school to Upper Primary. In other words, Kiribati appears to be moving towards a system not dissimilar to that proposed in the late 1960's, and indeed not dissimilar to the modified C.H.S. model. One alternative mooted, though apparently not yet under serious discussion, is that K.G.V. become a senior school similar to the Catholic Senior college, both taking in from a range of "Upper Primary" or "Junior Secondary" schools. In Kiribati fashion, adaption and consensus appears to be achieving in the education system what reports, reviews and commissions could not - a resolution of the tensions inherent in educational change.

FOOTNOTES

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